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Majoring in minorities

Programs lack hard evidence, but insiders say numbers are rising

By Rebecca Luczycki

Program managers who have launched initiatives in recent years to attract and retain racial and ethnic minority golfers are like chefs baking souffles: With patience and careful nurturing, they are seeing the numbers rise.

Programs to expand minority participation efforts stem from two overarching motives. One is the desire to bring minorities — particularly children—into the game in order to redress past discrimination, intentional or not. The other is to reach a grossly untapped market—and expand both the game and operators' bottom lines.

Today, only 3 percent of golfers are black and 2 percent Hispanic, according to the National Golf Foundation (NGF).

Prominent players

One of the primary tools for reaching minority golfers has been The First Tee, a concept created in 1997 by the PGA. It has gotten support from leading industry organizations, including associations and product manufacturers.

The First Tee presently operates at 13 facilities, offering free or low-cost golf to disadvantaged or inner-city youth, with another 30 under construction and 30 to 40 more planned to open over the next year. It also has nearly 90 facilities in planning in North



Ethnic minority golf programs are attempting to increase participation in an under-represented demographic.

America, with about 120 communities interested in establishing facilities, according to the organization.

"There are 450 to 500 grass-roots programs that target minority youth and golf."
—John David

Another major organization, the National Minority Golf Foundation (NMGF), got its start in 1996. It aims to increase minority golf participation at junior and collegiate levels. The group has organized

educational seminars to help grass-roots programs find funding and resources to succeed.

NMGF is also working with groups like the American Junior Golf Association and the International Junior Golf Tour to provide low-handicap, minority juniors with the national and collegiate experience they need to have a shot at becoming professional golfers.

"In 1999, we had 70 minority kids [in national exposure golfing events]," said NMGF president Barbara Douglas. "A few years ago that number would have been less than 10....We expect to

double it [this year]."

The Minority Golf Association of America (MGAA), meanwhile, has existed since 1991. It works with groups like Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA, and local parks and recreation associations across the country to increase junior golf participation.

And the Tiger Woods Foundation, among other things, has minority golf instructors teach juniors at clinics, followed by Woods leading discussions and putting on exhibitions for 2,500 kids from inner city neighborhoods and youth organizations and programs.

First On The Tee

Fuzzy on specifics

While these groups are active in many communities, gauging the total number of existing minority initiatives—and their success—is difficult. MGAA president John David says the number of minority initiatives and supporting funds have jumped significantly in recent years, thanks to the popularity of Tiger Woods.

"There are 450 to 500 grassroots programs that target minority youth and golf," David said. "There are more and more commitments being made to assist programs [for minority golfers] or add a golf initiative to existing programs."

But Douglas estimates that the number of programs is half that figure.

Getting insiders to agree on the number of minority golfers — or to produce measurable statistics — is difficult as well.

David says the NGF numbers are low. The MGAA's statistics place the number of black golfers at 4 percent, and Hispanics at 3 percent, of the 26.4 million U.S. golfers.

The one thing everyone agrees on is that it is too early to decide whether minority initiatives are increasing the number of golfers.

"We really just got started," said Len Stachitas, interim director of The First Tee. "It will take a few years to begin to collect and track that data."

General consensus

David says it's clear that the golf industry is making concerted efforts to welcome minorities, including in employment.

"I do see an outreach by the golf equipment companies especially, to provide opportunities for minorities to enter the industry," he said. "I see it at the facility level, too."

Douglas agrees there has been an increase in minority employment in the golf industry recently, and says the NMGF is making minority employment a focus for the coming year. The organization is compiling databases of minorities working in the golf industry and of internship opportunities for minority youth.

"We want to be the employment agency of choice when [golf facilities or companies] are looking to diversify their staff," she said.

What is also clear is that golf courses can benefit from becoming involved in minority programs. The Mill Pond Golf Course, a 27-hole facility that opened last year in Medford, N.Y., hosted a weekly MGAA program last summer.

Ralph Howe, the course's outings director, says the impetus for getting involved with the MGAA was mainly altruistic. But the course is already seeing some repeat play from minority juniors from the program.

"Every little bit helps as you promote the sport, and eventually that will pay off," he said.